



## Swimming upstream: balancing motherhood, academia and well-intentioned policies

Fiorella Montero-Diaz

To cite this article: Fiorella Montero-Diaz (2020) Swimming upstream: balancing motherhood, academia and well-intentioned policies, Ethnomusicology Forum, 29:3, 292-295, DOI: [10.1080/17411912.2020.1873558](https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1873558)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1873558>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Jan 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 203



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Swimming upstream: balancing motherhood, academia and well-intentioned policies


Fiorella Montero-Diaz 

Music and Music Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Keele University, Keele, UK

When I announced my first academic job in 2015, many of my non-academic friends and relatives congratulated me mentioning the perks of academia: flexible schedule, self-managed time, getting paid to explore great music passions. Fortunately, this is all true. However, as I found out quite early on my academic path, there are also clear downsides: hierarchical career structures that emphasise competition, the endless pursuit of academic impact and visibility, never-ending administration tasks, increased hours of teaching, the demands of new excellence framework schemes (TEF, REF, more admin, etc.), increased pressure on early-career researchers to maximise probation years by over-working, and department leaders and HR managers' lack of training in advising on and enacting new inclusive parental schemes policies, just to mention some. I am keenly aware of how privileged and lucky I am to have started my first academic job quite quickly after completing my PhD. Thus, what follows is by no means intended as a bitter critique from a privileged position; nor as an attempt to victimise female scholars. This is an account, based on empirical data (12 interviews with a diversity of female ethnomusicologists/musicologists with children in academia and, of course, on personal experience: that of a queer early career ethnomusicology lecturer with a two-year-old child.<sup>1</sup>

There is today more awareness, at least in terms of discussions of gender equality, gender pay gap, parental support, inclusive environments (e.g. Athena SWAN, LGBTQI), than in the past. Yet, in practice, little is being done to counter disparity or balance workloads, at least during early childrearing years. Let us bear in mind that the Equality Challenge Unit, which manages the Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science (STEMM scholars), was created in 2005, but it was only ten years later that it was expanded to include Women in Arts, Humanities and Social Science.<sup>2</sup> The charter encourages institutions to sign up to ten principles that focus on the advancement of gender equality in academia, addressing unequal gender representation across academic disciplines, professional and support functions and removing the obstacles faced by women in particular, at major points of career development and progression.<sup>3</sup> According to most of the women interviewed, these are well-intentioned policies and recommendations for academic best practice. However, many institutions appear to see this as an exercise in ticking boxes rather than an opportunity to make the changes needed to

---

**CONTACT** Fiorella Montero-Diaz  [r.montero.diaz@keele.ac.uk](mailto:r.montero.diaz@keele.ac.uk)

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

keep women with children in academia and foster a better family/work balance in general. It is important to add here, that out of the twelve female academics with children interviewed for this study, five have already abandoned their work as academics, and one is contemplating quitting in the coming years. This is half of my sample.

We have an Athena Swan bronze award, yet I am usually expected to attend meetings after 6pm, most of my male colleagues can make this time, I can't as I am still breastfeeding and really want to be at home before my daughter goes to bed. The meeting goes ahead, I have to be happy with the agreements taken in my absence. (Female, 35)<sup>4</sup>

In exploring with my collaborators why academia fails to allow women to reach their full potential, some of the reasons given were: underrepresentation of women who are mothers in senior positions or important leadership roles; expectation of long non-family-friendly working hours, isolation in the work place; greater tendency to assign pastoral roles to women due to perceived maternal qualities; more teaching hours assigned to women as many are perceived as better teachers than their male counterparts. According to my interviewees, in some institutions academic peer reviews yield better feedback when men review men, than when men review women. Therefore departments with more men apparently do much better in REF audits and probation reviews than departments with more women represented, which cement stereotypes and the preference for hiring men rather than women for key roles.

I am the only female at my Department, we are ten people in total, all males older than 50 years. I am the only mother of a child under 3. It is very difficult to get my voice heard as a female and as a mother when planning meetings, teaching hours, or when exercising authority. (Female, 36)

In my own case, for example, when my wife and I were expecting our son, I had to request 'paternity leave', which created the most awkward conversations with Human Resources (HR). My line manager allowed me to take an extra week as annual leave for medical reasons, leading a colleague to ask me why I was given something to which I was not entitled, as I was not a father (paternity leave). He also queried whether, as a lesbian, I was entitled to an extra week, just because I am gay. These sorts of comments persisted, and were exacerbated when I tried to take shared parental leave, as part of a new scheme which allows fathers to share leave entitlement in a child's first year. HR told me that up to then no fathers had opted to take this form of leave at my institution, so I would be the first to request it. This also meant that few people were aware of this scheme or my right to apply for it. While attempting to secure shared parental leave, I mentioned Athena Swan, LGBTI policies, and even some statistics, which generated more awkwardness. To my institution's credit, apologies were subsequently given, lessons were learnt, and training was offered to senior colleagues. However, the process left me feeling so awkward that I ultimately desisted from taking this leave entitlement. A queer female scholar based at another institution told me:

I preferred to take annual leave rather than take shared parental leave, you take the leave to be with your family, and avoid the looks, the comments, and the eternal fight. I even filed a complaint when I got back, I was also invited to several Athena Swan focus groups. Nothing was done against the male professor who bullied me for being a gay mum of adopted twins. I just didn't deserve anything, I didn't give birth, and as I was told, "there was already another mum at home". (Female, 45)

A 2012 report by Devillard *et al.* indicates that 54 percent of men, especially those who are unaware of obstacles to women's career progression, view measures to promote women leaders as unfair to men (see also Devonport 2015). This tendency was also highlighted by my collaborators:

I was copied into this email from a male academic to the head of school:

Is it true that we have family friendly 'Athena Swan' policies in place? If so then it would certainly be actively discriminating against the bachelors and spinsters amongst us and those without family and children whilst offering an advantageous position for those with, especially women. (Female, 38)

It is not all bad. Since the launch of Athena SWAN, universities have had to take notice, applications for the awards have – in the best cases – led to conversations among colleagues and deep reflection on gender equality practices, strengths and challenges. What matters is depth of institutional awareness and commitment, which is brought about by every conversation on these topics in which women and men academics engage, and by every decision to speak up and create awareness rather than accept indifference and ignorance. The hope is that by increasing awareness, we can all implement strategies that will effect positive change.

As long as women are underrepresented in senior positions, fewer women will believe that an academic career is possible for them. While women with children continue to comply with family unfriendly schedules, while we do not challenge negative comments on requests for maternity/paternity leave, or resistance from line managers to cover parents on parental leave, there will be women, especially mothers, who find that they resent academia and that it is impossible to achieve their full potential. It is on all of us to change this.

## Notes

1. Age of child and career stage at date of original conference presentation (April 2018).
2. For more information see: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/>.
3. For more on this see: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/about-athena-swan/>.
4. All participants have been anonymised on their request.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Fiorella Montero-Diaz** (M.Mus Goldsmiths, PhD Royal Holloway, University of London) is a Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at Keele University in the UK. She has published widely on contemporary popular music in Lima, Peru. Her research focuses on hybridity, citizenship, race, whiteness, class, and social conflict. She is currently conducting research on LGBTI musical resistances in Lima and Bogota (Academy of Medical Sciences – GCRF Networking Grant). Fiorella is serving as member of the Executive Board of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology.

## ORCID

Fiorella Montero-Diaz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2244-2585>

## References

- Devillard, Sandrine, Wieteke Graven, Emily Lawson, Renée Paradise and Sandra Sancier-Sultan. 2012. *Women Matter: Making the Breakthrough*. McKinsey & Company. [https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Organization/Our%20Insights/Women%20matter/Women\\_matter\\_mar2012\\_english%20\(1\).ashx](https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Organization/Our%20Insights/Women%20matter/Women_matter_mar2012_english%20(1).ashx)
- Devonport, Tracey. 2015. 'Athena SWAN or Ugly Duckling? An Overview of the Important Issues Surrounding Athena SWAN'. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist* 46: 6–7. [https://isesstaffnews.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/tses-winter-2015-issue\\_46-page-10-11-squash.pdf](https://isesstaffnews.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/tses-winter-2015-issue_46-page-10-11-squash.pdf)